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AUTHOR Maxwell, Laurie
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ABSTRACT

This summary presents the major findings of recent research carried out at the Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools at Johns Hopkins University and published in "Ability Grouping and Student Achievement in Elementary Schools: A Best-Evidence Synthesis." The center examined more than 100 studies of five ability-grouping plans commonly used in elementary schools: between-class, within-class, regrouping for reading and/or mathematics, the "Joplin Plan," and nongraded plans stressing individualized instruction. The findings indicate that assigning elementary students to classrooms according to academic abilities, sometimes called tracking, does not raise pupil achievement. However, grouping pupils within a class for one or two subjects, such as reading or mathematics, can be highly effective. The grouping plans most apt to boost student achievement share at least three criteria: (1) they place students together according to ability levels in the specific skill being taught; (2) they are flexible enough to allow teachers to reassign students to different ability groups if their academic performance changes; and (3) they allow teachers to vary their pace and level of instruction to respond to students' needs. (Several sources for further information on ability grouping are given.) (JAZ)

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Research in Brief

Chester E. Finn, Jr., Assistant Secretary

William J. Bennett, Secretary

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Making the Most of Ability Grouping

Each school day millions of American youngsters are grouped by academic ability to study everything from long division to the War of 1812.

But does this controversial practice improve student achievement?

It depends on how the grouping is done, according to recent research at the Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools at Johns Hopkins University.*

The center examined more than 100 studies of five ability-grouping plans commonly used in elementary schools–between-class, within-class, regrouping for reading and/or mathematics, the "Joplin plan", and nongraded plans. The finding: assigning elementary students to classrooms according to academic abilities–sometimes called tracking–does *not* raise student achievement. But grouping pupils *within* a class for one or two subjects such as reading or math can be highly effective.

Why Group By Ability?

On the surface, it makes sense to group by ability.

Put high-achieving students together to teach them more advanced material and at a faster pace. Supposedly, the competition will motivate them to succeed.

Group low-achieving students together to teach them at a suitable level and at a slower pace. Supposedly, they will be better off academically and emotionally by not competing with the high achievers.

Critics of ability grouping complain that the practice "labels" low achievers and produces low expectations that may be self-fulfilling. Also, they say, high achievers must learn to interact with low achievers–and vice versa–because they'll have to do so throughout life. Those are the common assumptions. What does the research show?

By Class And Within Class

Some schools assign students *to classes* on the basis of ability or achievement. For example, the students might be in a high-achieving third grade or a low-achieving third grade, or in a sixth-grade class that moves together from teacher to teacher.

Finding: This kind of ability grouping does *not* enhance student achievement in elementary school.

Other schools group students of similar abilities *within a classroom.* For reading instruction, for instance, students are assigned according to their reading skills to one of several groups. These groups read different materials at different rates. For math, for instance, two or more ability groups may work at different levels and rates. In another form of math grouping, the teacher gives a lesson to the math class as a whole and, afterwards, while the students are working on problems, the teacher provides enrichment to a high-achieving group, remedial instruction or more explanation to low achievers, and something in between to average students.

Finding: Not enough studies of this type of grouping exist to support or disclaim its effectiveness for teaching reading. But research shows that within-class grouping *is* effective for teaching mathematics, especially if only two or three groups are formed. The positive effects are slightly greater for low achievers than for high achievers.

Regrouping Can Help

A third ability-grouping plan assigns students to heterogeneous, self-contained homeroom classes for most of the day. But for part of the day, students are *regrouped* and placed in separate classrooms according to academic ability to study one or more subjects–usually reading or math. For example, all fourth-graders would have reading instruction at the same time, but in separate, ability-grouped classrooms.

Finding: Regrouping for reading and math within the grade level can improve student achievement, but teachers must adapt the level and pace of instruction to achievement levels. Students should not be regrouped for more than one or two subjects.

Joplin Plan Gets An "A"

A fourth plan–the *"Joplin plan"* for teaching reading, which originated in Joplin, Missouri–assigns students to self-contained classes most of the day but regroups them for reading across grade lines. A fifth-grade reading class might include high-achieving fourth-graders, fifth-graders of average reading ability, and sixth-graders who read below their grade level.

*The U.S. Department of Education funds 14 research and development centers across the country. These centers conduct research on ways to improve American education.

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Finding: Research clearly supports the Joplin plan for reading. (The Joplin plan as such has not been used to teach mathematics. Joplin-like, nongraded plans are discussed below.)

A fifth type of plan—a *"nongraded" or "ungraded"* plan—takes the Joplin plan several steps further and stresses individualized instruction. Generally, a nongraded program groups students according to their performance, not their age. The curriculum is divided into levels through which students progress at their own rates, picking up each year where they ceased the previous year. A full-scale, nongraded plan might use team teaching, individualized instruction, learning centers, and other flexible approaches.

Finding: Research findings are more mixed than for the Joplin plan but, overall, the findings support using this type of plan.

Why Do Some Plans Work?

Plans most apt to boost student achievement share at least three criteria:

- They place students together according to ability levels in the specific skill being taught;
- They are flexible enough to allow teachers to reassign students to different ability groups if their academic performance changes; and
- They allow teachers to vary their pace and level of instruction to respond to students' needs.

This helps explain why students do *not* benefit when they are assigned to classrooms according to academic abilities. Tracking generally groups students by I.Q. or overall achievement levels instead of by the specific skills being taught, and teachers don't often move students from lower- to higher-ability groups even when their academic performance warrants it.

The criteria also explain why students can benefit when grouped for one or two subjects; these three benchmarks are satisfied. This is particularly true of plans that benefit students the most—within-class grouping for mathematics and the nongraded and Joplin plans for reading.

Why Group For The 2 Rs?

Reading and arithmetic lend themselves particularly well to within-class groupings because these subjects require the building of skill upon skill. If a teacher goes too rapidly in reading or arithmetic, some students will be "lost." In other subjects—for example, science and history—learning the next skill depends less on having mastered earlier material.

Moreover, an ungrouped, heterogeneous reading class creates a distinct problem: the teacher probably can't use one basal reader. It is unrealistic to expect low achievers to read and understand material far above their reading level, or to expect high achievers to profit from material that is much too easy.

Critics of ability grouping cite detrimental psychological effects of placing youngsters in a low-achieving class. However, children placed in low-achieving reading and mathematics groups within heterogeneous classes feel all right about it because most see it as something to help them. This is especially true if their assignment is clearly focused on achievement in the particular subject and if they are moved as they progress. Grouping for only one or two subjects also allows low achievers to identify with the class as a whole.

Teachers may not expect as much of students in low reading or math groups, but they spend more time with these students and nudge them along faster than teachers with self-contained classes of low achievers.

Grouping More Effectively

After years of use in the Nation's schools, ability grouping is still misused and misunderstood. Robert E. Slavin, author of the Johns Hopkins study, suggests that elementary schools that group students by ability do so as follows:

- Assign children to heterogeneous homeroom classes, then regroup them for one or two subjects such as reading and arithmetic. This allows students to identify primarily with the homeroom class;
- Group according to performance in the specific skill being taught, not just in I.Q. or overall achievement level;
- Reassess students frequently and reassign them when they progress;
- Adapt the level and pace of instruction to the students' readiness levels; and
- Form only a few groups within a class—this way the teacher can give better direct instruction to each group.

Laurie Maxwell, Writer
Nancy Paulu, Editor
Information Services, OERI

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"Ability Grouping and Student Achievement in Elementary Schools: A Best-Evidence Synthesis" (103 pages) by Robert E. Slavin, Johns Hopkins University, is available for $6.50 from the Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools, Johns Hopkins University, 3505 North Charles Street, Baltimore, MD 21218.

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An OERI-funded study of ability grouping 1,477 fourth- through seventh-grade students in California was completed last year by Maureen T. Hallinan, University of Notre Dame, and Aage B. Sorensen, Harvard University, for the University of Wisconsin's Center for Education Research. A 2-page summary, "The Effects of Instructional Grouping on Growth in Academic Achievement," is available free by writing to Information Services, OERI, at the address below. This research was conducted for the former OERI-funded Wisconsin Center for Educational Research and Improvement. The new OERI-funded Center on Effective Secondary Schools at the University of Wisconsin will begin a study next year to see how the ability grouping of eighth graders affects their progress in high school.

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For more information about ability grouping, contact Dr. René Gonzalez or Dr. Alexander Cuthbert, OERI. For information about the Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools, contact Dr. Gonzalez; for information about the Center for Research on Secondary Schools, contact Dr. Tommy M. Tomlinson, OERI. The OERI address is 555 New Jersey Avenue NW., Washington, DC 20208. For general information, call OERI toll-free, on (800) 424-1616.